

Transfiguration Sunday: Glory and Dust

February 11, 2018

2 Kings 2:1-12; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

Grace to you and peace...

We are surrounded by glory this morning – did you hear it?!

The first reading is thick with tension as Elijah and Elisha prepare for Elijah to be taken up in a whirlwind – surely a sign of God’s glory. Grieving the pending loss of his mentor and friend, and uncertain of his ability to bear his new role, Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah’s spirit. Obediently, Elisha watches as chariots of Israel and horses of fire lift Elijah into heaven. Elisha tears his clothing as a sign of his profound grief, even as the glory of God confirms the transfer of power and both men are transformed.

In our second reading Paul makes the distinction between glory for the sake of glory, which is the blindness of this world, versus glory for the sake of seeing and shining – that is, revelation. We behold and we are transformed. God shines through Christ, Christ shines through us. That is the “light that shines out of darkness” in and through real, messy, glorious and grim lives; ordinary people who trust in the glory of God.

In the Gospel account, Mark is revealing to his earliest audience who Jesus actually is...the Son of God, the Holy One, God’s Beloved Son. Mark is making a persuasive argument: Jesus is not just a miracle-worker, but actual Divine Presence; in continuity with God’s work ongoing work as through Moses and Elijah.

It's likely we have become complacent. Most of us have heard and learned from early childhood that Jesus is both human and divine. We've confessed in the Creeds and witnessed in baptism that the One Holy God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit – One God, Mother of us all. We have (likely) settled into our own relatively comfortable reconciliation of this Divine mystery; a way we've made sense of it such that we are no longer shocked or startled or disturbed by Jesus' two-fold identity and power. Most often, I suspect, we've either rationalized Jesus into simply a teacher who shows us how to lead a good life, or we've distanced ourselves from Jesus by seeing him as “mostly God” – The perfection of God contained in a human body that was just a shell – living a perfection that we neither could nor should aspire to.

It's well past time for us to be startled again.

This Jesus, who walked the shores of the sea of Galilee and hung out with fishermen, who spoke with authority to both the scribes and the unclean spirits, who took Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and raised her up from illness to service... This Jesus is also the radiant revelation of God's Holiness, named and claimed as Beloved.

And if that claim is true – that truth has a claim on us as well. Every day. In all that we are and do and think and experience. Jesus' identity is DISRUPTIVE. And not just for him – but for us. Once we see the glory of God in the face of Christ, we can do nothing other than see all of life through the light of Christ.

Once you have caught a glimpse of the truth, Truth holds a claim on your life.

That's the driving premise of the movie "The Post." Set in the early 1970's, it's the story of how the Pentagon Papers – the study that revealed the depth and extent of the deception and secrecy that surrounded the Viet Nam war for decades, through multiple Administrations – were released by the Washington Post.

A young Daniel Ellsworth discovers the truth about the war – that no one in either the military or the government thought the war was winnable – and in fact were complicit in manipulating the politics of Southeast Asia – but continued to risk the lives of countless young men in a hopeless cause rather than risk the humiliation of admitting the US had lost a war. Such knowledge compelled Daniel to violate national security laws and steal the top secret papers. The truth that thousands of people were dying so that government leaders could save face was a moral conflict he couldn't live with.

At one point in the movie, Dan Ellsworth has reconnected with Ben, a college friend who is now an established writer at the Post. They meet in a clandestine motel room where Ellsworth has the documents spread in piles around the room, and Ben can see the massive evidence for himself.

Daniel asks, "Would you go to jail for the truth?"

"I would in theory," comes the reply. Gesturing to the spread of documents laid out around them Daniel says, "Well...it's not theoretical any more, is it?"

Each character, - from the newsroom staff all the way to the owner and (New) President of the Post - wrestles with the clash between what is true and honorable and right, and dangerous...and

what is safe, and legal, and cloaked in political power...
but conceals the truth.

When you can see the truth clearly, the Truth lays a claim on your life.

We gather here for worship each week because Jesus has laid a claim on our lives. But it's oh so very easy to turn sideways to that claim, trying to diminish its call, or to dismiss it as unrealistic. After all we are saved by grace and it doesn't matter what we actually do with our lives, right? And...we'll always be sinful, right? Or maybe we even seek escape in the broad claims of "truth" – it's all relative, right? Maybe Jesus is just one among many good teachers and it doesn't really matter which we follow...

It may be, of course, that you haven't had a mountain-top experience of Divine revelation yourself. It could be that your faith is what you inherited from your parents, or simply the tradition you grew up in. Maybe, like Elisha, you feel ill-equipped to follow your master without a "double portion" of his spirit. You feel simply too ordinary to consider a Divine call on your life and work.

And even if you have had a mystical experience, a sense that God has come close, a glimmer of holiness that caught your breath and made you alive with wonder and fear...well, we don't usually talk about those, do we? How would we explain such a moment, without sounding weird, or a little bit crazy, or like a religious nutcase? Such experience, such knowledge, comes unexpectedly and can't be proven with empirical evidence, right? So mostly we just keep such things inside – and perhaps long for

more such revelation – wondering if its absence is a sign of insufficient faith.

Over these past several weeks, during Education time, we've been hearing from members as they reflected on their lives and vocations. Each week two people from different age groups took the risk of reflecting on their sense of call in their work or in their identity. We've listened as people acknowledged the very real struggle to find meaningful work that honored who they believe themselves to be. And though there has been little expressly religious language in the stories they've told, the listening time has been holy. In serendipitous encounters, unexpected life events, and conversations with trusted friends and guides, the story-tellers have revealed glimpses of revelation and inspiration as they've made their way through life. I can't recall anyone speaking of "glowing Jesus" and an audible voice from heaven, but nevertheless it has been something of a mystical experience to listen as they shared.

I'm pretty sure others have felt it too. Attendance at the Education hour has increased during these weeks. People have made a point of coming to each session, as if longing to hear more from faith companions on this journey. Table conversations following the "guest speakers" have been deeper and more revealing than what we often settle for during forum time. Hearing honest revelation and vulnerability from fellow members seems to have laid a claim on our lives too, and invited us to respond with our own risks and truths.

Jesus took with him only a few of his disciples up the mountain. Only Peter, James, and John were there to witness Jesus' transfiguration; to see him talking with Moses and with Elijah.

Only those three heard the Divine Voice declare again Jesus' identity as Son and Beloved, and received God's command to "listen to him." It's only human that Peter would want to preserve the moment – to build monuments to the holiness they had just witnessed and dwell in that other realm for the rest of their days.

But revelation doesn't work that way. Visions of glory do not serve themselves. The glory of Jesus, the glowing light of God's presence, and the revelation of Jesus' identity is for the sake of the whole world. Jesus immediately returns to his ministry among the people, and commands his disciples to say nothing about their glimpse of holiness. The fullness of Jesus' life and work cannot be understood without the cross and resurrection. The glory of heaven comes down to the dust of the earth, and there continues its work of transfiguration.

The truth of Jesus is Disruptive. His claim on your life will not settle for being comfortable, or reasonable, or safe. The glimpses and glimmers of holiness, the whispers of divinity that brush across your life, are your own transfiguration moments, given for the sake of the world. Your longing for depth and meaning; your hunger for peace or purpose, your ache for justice and integrity – all of these are the work of the Spirit stirring in you an authentic hunger for God.

We turn now, individually and as a community, from the glory of Transfiguration to the dust of Ash Wednesday. Through the season of Lent we will explore the many ways we hunger for God's presence and purpose in our lives and in the world. We will practice the disciplines of lent – praying together, fasting from our over-consumption, and giving to others – in order to better live into Jesus' claim on our lives.

Jesus' identity is revealed three times in Mark's gospel. At his baptism, God's voice from heaven was an intimate word to Jesus himself. On the mountain top, the Divine declaration is God's word to us. And at the moment of his death on the cross, the centurion's proclamation is for the whole world. We've heard the truth about Jesus' identity. We've acknowledged Jesus' claim on our lives in the waters of Baptism, and each time we approach Christ's table of mercy and grace.

Are we willing to risk transfiguration for the sake of Jesus?

...It's not theoretical anymore, is it?

Amen.